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Behind the Rhetorical Scenes of Offence: A Rhetorical Analysis of Complained-about Offensive Advertising

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1 Introduction

Studies of rhetorical strategies, and particularly rhetorical figures, in advertising have largely focused on positive contexts and generating positive responses, such as increasing the likeability of ads (e.g. Delbaere et al., 2011; McQuarrie and Phillips, 2005). However, Theodorakis et al. (2015) argue that applying rhetoric in controversial ads may not weaken possible negative responses and could even worsen them. Controversial advertising encompasses a range of predominantly negative responses from distaste and disgust, through offence, outrage and embarrassment, to shock and surprise, from a part of the population (Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson, 2008; Waller, 2005). Offence is one such negative response triggered by violation of social norms (Dahl et al., 2003), often surrounding hotly debated socio-political issues such as gender representations, racism, or advertising to children. More specifically, while the source of controversy and offence in advertising is primarily associated with visual imagery (e.g. violence, sex), these responses can also be generated by verbal (e.g. profane and obscene language) and visual-verbal elements of the executional tactic (see Dahl et al., 2003), as well as by advertising an inherently controversial product (e.g. contraception) (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Waller, 2005). However, existing research on offensive advertising largely focuses on potential consumer responses, leaving us with a rather limited understanding of the nature and intensity of the actual offence caused (Beard, 2008).

This study aims to examine rhetorical strategies, including classical rhetorical appeals chosen and rhetorical figures applied, used in advertisements that have generated actual offence in the form of official complaints to an advertising regulator. It builds on a larger project exploring the current state of shocking, offensive, and controversial advertising research (Author, under review) and which takes a critical perspective on the regulatory processes of such advertising (Author, working paper). As such, it contributes to the conversation on offensive advertising by addressing Beard's (2008) call to specifically analyse complained-about advertisements to better understand actual, rather than potential, offence. This study further contributes to our current knowledge by offering a wealth of empirical material in the form of a rich archive of advertisements that the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) UK received complaints about on the basis of

offensiveness. By examining this broader range of ads that use a variety of rhetorical appeals and rhetorical figures, in their visual and verbal form, this study expands on Theodorakis and colleagues' (2015) specific focus on resonance and visual depictions of violence and eroticism, thus providing a broader understanding of the rhetorical elements that may be triggering responses of offence. Finally, it proposes an innovative method of rhetorical analysis as an approach to better understand the strategies of persuasion applied in offensive advertising.

For the purposes of this chapter, an in-depth analysis of one carefully selected ad is presented as an illustrative example of both the dataset and the method.

2 Literature review

2.1 Advertising rhetoric

According to Aristotle, rhetoric is an art of persuasion, otherwise defined as 'an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion' (Aristotle, 2007, 37). As such, it is a method or manner of persuasion not related to any particular subject. With advertising being possibly the most common form of persuasive discourse, it is important to understand its persuasive power. While descriptive studies of advertising content are common, historically, less attention has been given to ad style (Scott, 1994), or the manner by which that content is communicated (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2002). In fact, it has been noted that rhetoric is a rare choice of framework in marketing scholarship (Tonks, 2002) and a forthcoming *Journal of Marketing Management* special issue on 'Marketing (as) Rhetoric' (Miles and Nilsson, forthcoming) aims to rectify this by increasing engagement with rhetorical themes across marketing theory and practice. Accordingly, reasons to study rhetoric specifically in the context of advertising include: (1) advertising's influence on public opinions, behaviours, and consumption practices, (2) advertising's impact on the public's view of the society (e.g. what is acceptable, or desired), and (3) advertising forming part of organisational rhetoric and representing the company.

Tonks (2002, 807) defines two main streams of rhetoric: (1) the classical 'old' rhetoric, represented by the first rhetoricians such as Corax and Tisias, followed by the Sophists, Plato and Aristotle, through to the Romans and notably Cicero, including Aristotelian rhetorical appeal to *logos, ethos* and *pathos*, and type of argument, and (2) the 'new' rhetoric (e.g. Burke, 1969), which in advertising predominantly focuses on rhetorical figures or persuasive devices (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996).

Firstly, within the classical stream, one theory in particular stands out within our current understanding of the advertising world and that is Aristotle's proposition that rhetoric consists of three components or *pisteis* – *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* – that persuade in different ways. Aristotle maintains that *logos* is an appeal to reason or logic and in advertising is represented by product/service information, claims, or evidence. *Ethos* is an appeal grounded in the speaker's credibility and moral competence manifested by promoting the advertising organisation's good moral character, good sense, and goodwill. *Pathos* is an appeal to the audience's emotions, which in the case of offensive advertising may appear to be mostly negative, including fear, shame, pity, anger, or unfriendliness. While the relevance of this rhetorical theory remains evident in current advertising debates specifically about the persuasive effectiveness of rational and emotional appeals, its roots are seldom acknowledged. Moreover, such debates rarely include a consideration of the ethical appeal, despite the rise of 'the ethical consumer' and arguably growing trends of ethically-oriented organisations. Nevertheless, with advertising increasingly attempting to create an emotional brand connection in the commercial context and entice emotional connections to social issues and charitable causes in the not-for-profit (NFP) context, it could be argued that *pathos* in particular should be of great interest to advertising researchers and practitioners.

Delving deeper into what Aristotle teaches us about mobilising *pathos*, his theatrical perspective in the works of *Poetics* (2013) and his rhetorical perspective in the works of *On Rhetoric* (2007) are explored. In *Poetics*, Aristotle alludes to a theory of *catharsis*, which, while highly debated amongst academics (e.g. Berczeller, 1967), suggests that fiction or theatre (and in our case advertising) is able to produce real effects on the audience because the audience identifies and empathises with the characters portrayed and experiences the situation through them. Through this cathartic effect, advertisers can thus generate real emotions in their audience tin order to get them respond in a desired way. In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle teaches how to give a speech in the political context, where many social issues are discussed. He proposes that to arouse an emotion in the audience, the speaker, or advertiser in our case, must know: 1) the nature of the emotion, or the state of mind of one feeling the emotion, e.g. fear is accompanied by an expectation of experiencing some destructive misfortune; 2) the object of the emotion, or those towards whom we can feel the sought emotion, e.g. to create pity, one needs to portray someone evidently and undeservedly suffering and; 3) the causes or reasons for the emotion, e.g. belittling through contempt or insult causes anger. Having this knowledge can thus help the advertiser to create the desired emotional appeal.

Secondly, rhetorical arguments or appeals are frequently applied in advertising through the use of rhetorical figures, defined as artful deviations from audience expectations (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996) or artful arrangements of words and pictures designed to create a specific effect on their audience (McQuarrie and Mick, 1993). An implicit theory of figuration was first introduced by Aristotle in his discussions of style of a speech and more specifically ornamentation of speech. However, Aristotle did not provide us with any working framework or typology and instead focused on the effects of the use of rhetorical figures on memory. More recently, various taxonomies of rhetorical figures have been introduced in rhetorical studies (e.g. Burke, 1941; Corbett and Connors, 1999), while others have been adapted for the advertising context (Gkiouzepas and Hogg, 2011; McQuarrie and Mick, 1996; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004). In advertising, rhetorical figures appear verbally or visually (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996, 1999, 2003; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004; Scott, 1994), or as an interaction of the verbal and the visual (Stathakopoulos et al., 2008). Rhetorical figures have received sustained attention and have been shown to have positive effect on attitudinal (Delbaere et al., 2011; McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; McQuarrie and Mick, 2003; Stathakopoulos et al., 2008) and cognitive (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Mothersbaugh et al., 2002; Stathakopoulos et al., 2008) outcomes. Despite this growing interest in consumer responses to rhetorical figures, rhetoric remains very underutilised in advertising analyses (some exceptions: Leigh, 1994; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, 1993; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2002).

2.2 Offensive advertising

Rhetorical strategies have primarily been researched in positive or neutral advertising contexts (e.g. McQuarrie and Phillips, 2005), with some exceptions including Dean's (2005) study of fear appeals and negative political campaigning and Theodorakis and colleagues' (2015) study of controversial contexts. However, advertisers increasingly use tactics that shock, disgust, provoke, or offend audiences (Dahl et al., 2003; Dens et al., 2008; Pope et al., 2004) to stand out from the media clutter and facilitate behavioural change (Dahl et al., 2003). Research has shown that while attitudinal responses to controversial and offensive advertising are very mixed (Author, under review), the surprise factor, and incongruity with the audiences' expectations, is what leads to increased elaborative processing and comprehension (Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson, 2008). Conversely, these tactics can also lead to various negative behavioural responses: ignoring the message, product/brand boycotting, negative word-of-mouth, engaging in online activities and boycotts, or official complaints to the advertiser and/or the regulator (Kerr et al., 2012; Waller, 2005). These behaviours are a response to one or more of the three dimensions of offensive advertising: (1) 'matter' – the product advertised is inherently controversial or offensive; (2) 'manner' – offensive themes are applied in the execution of the ad (Barnes and Dotson, 1990) and;

(3) 'media' – the choice of media channel is seen as inappropriate for the ad (Phau and Prendergast, 2001).

Existing research into offensive advertising largely focuses on measuring effectiveness of various advertising tactics and appeals and identifying what products or portrayed themes may be found offensive by audiences (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Dahl et al., 2003; Fam and Waller, 2003; Waller et al., 2005). However, little research attempts to better our understanding of the specific verbal and visual elements, and rhetorical strategies, used that may have an impact on generating offence as a response. This reflects the prevalent focus on consumer response and limited research into the creative processes involved in the production of potentially controversial and norm-violating advertising. Moreover, the current focus lies on potential offence, rather than studies of actual offence caused by actual ads (Beard, 2008).

3 Methodology

This study presents a rhetorical analysis of a set of ads deemed offensive by complainants to the ASA and consequently investigated under the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) advertising codes. Rhetorical analysis was deemed an appropriate approach to better understand the role of persuasive strategies applied, both verbally and visually, in offensive advertising, as rhetoric is centred around persuasion (Aristotle, 2007; Corbett and Connors, 1999), rather than description or (mis)representation (e.g. Williamson, 1978). Offensive advertising itself being grounded on incongruity, or deviation from social norms (Dahl et al., 2003; Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson, 2008), renders the study of artful deviations from audience expectations, an interesting and fruitful endeavour. Additionally, in comparison to discourse analysis that examines a corpus of text and how it functions in the broader cultural context, rhetorical analysis allows for individual explorations of texts and their arguments.

3.1 Rhetorical frameworks

This study explores rhetorical strategies deployed in offensive advertising through the identification of the rhetorical appeal used to persuade the audience (Aristotle, 2007), and the rhetorical figures used as persuasive devices (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996). Following Aristotle's (2007) framework defining three types of appeals – *logos, ethos, pathos*, each ad is classified into a category of its main persuasive appeal, and its sub-categories. *Logos* is subdivided into artistic (e.g. logical argument, definitions, examples) and non-artistic proofs (e.g. evidence, claims). *Ethos* consists of demonstrating good sense *(phronesis)* or practical wisdom, good moral character *(arete)* or virtue, and good will towards the audience *(eunoia).* The subcategories of *pathos* are defined by different emotions, as listed

by Aristotle in Book II of *On Rhetoric*: anger and calmness, friendliness and enmity, fear and confidence, shame and shamelessness, kindliness and unkindliness, pity and indignation, envy and emulation (Aristotle, 2007). Where appropriate or necessary, this list is further complemented by an adapted Batra and Holbrook's (1990) typology of emotional responses to advertising.

In order to identify and explore the rhetorical devices, this analysis primarily relies on McQuarrie and Mick's (1996) typology of rhetorical figures differentiating between schemes, operationalised through repetition or reversal, and tropes, operationalised through substitution or destabilisation. Where appropriate, for visual rhetorical figures, Phillips and McQuarrie's (2004) typology of visual rhetoric that is based on an intersection of the visual structure (juxtaposition, fusion, and replacement) and meaning operation (connection, comparison for similarity, and comparison for opposition) is also adopted. Further elements of this analysis of rhetorical figures include layering, i.e. use of multiple rhetorical figures within one ad, and verbal anchoring, i.e. a non-rhetorical verbal explanation accompanying the rhetorical figure (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2002).

3.2 Context

In response to Beard's (2008) call for studies of actual, rather than potential offense, this study focuses on a set of ads that have generated offence to the extent that they were complained about to the UK's official advertising regulatory body, the Advertising Standards Authority. More specifically, this study has chosen to focus on ads generated by the NFP sector for the following reasons: (1) NFP organisations (charities, governmental bodies, civil society organisations) increasingly use shocking and offensive tactics (Dahl et al., 2003; Parry et al., 2013); (2) these tactics appear to be more tolerated in the NFP sector as the objectives of NFP organisations contribute to the greater good (Parry et al., 2013); and; (3) the ethicality of using such themes in NFP marketing remains a hotly debated subject (Hastings et al., 2004; Jones and van Putten, 2008).

3.3 Data collection

The set of advertisements used in this study is drawn from a larger archive of ASA adjudication reports covering the 6-year period from 2009-2015, specifically regarding investigations and rulings on advertising that is considered offensive and/or harmful by the complainants and categorised as not-for-profit by the ASA. This archive consists of 309 reports, which include descriptions of the complained-about ads. From the 309 searched-for ads, 213 (69%) have been identified based on these descriptions and retrieved through a search of the organisations' websites, creative agency websites, websites of ad catalogues (e.g. coloribus.com, adforum.com, adsoftheworld.com, adage.com), the records of the Institute of

Practitioners in Advertising, as well as Google and YouTube. The remaining 96 cases (31%) might have never been digitalised or have been removed from the internet, and thus were deemed irretrievable.

4 Findings

The full dataset is comprised of ads largely produced by charities (46%; n=98) and governmental bodies (28%; n=60) followed by pressure groups, trade associations, churches and other non-commercial organisations (26%; n=55). The issues for the complainants revolve around harm or offence to children (46%; n=98), inappropriate scheduling (29%; n=61), depiction of children (22%; n=46), and graphical imagery (19%; n=41). Twenty-two percent (n=46) six of the cases have undergone a formal investigation, with the rest being informally resolved. Few have been upheld (8%; n=18) or upheld in part (4%; n=8) by the ASA. At least 14% of the campaigns (n=29) have won at least one advertising award.

For the purposes of this paper, an illustrative in-depth rhetorical analysis of one carefully selected ad is presented. This ad is judged representative of the sample as it is produced by a charity and was complained about for offensive depiction of children, and offensive depictions of men and violence. Following a formal investigation by the regulator, the complaint was not upheld, and interestingly, the ad itself was highly commended at the Scottish Creative Awards 2015. Further, it has both verbal and visual components and uses a rhetorical figure.

'Barrier', the 2015 ad from Children's Hearings Scotland (CHS), was selected. CHS is a public body that supports the national Children's Panel by recruiting, selecting, and training panel members, and ultimately aims to improve the outcomes and experiences for vulnerable children and young people in Scotland (Children's Hearings Scotland, 2018). Created by The Union, UK, the ad portrays a father figure leaning over a kitchen table with one arm raised about to deliver a hit. On the other side of the table sits a boy around the age of seven with his hands raised up in the air and a distressed look in his face. The image is divided in half with a light-coloured insert and a text stating: 'You could be all that's between Jaime and another beating.' This is followed by further information about the benefits of volunteering for the Children's Panel, guidance on how to join, and the CHS logo. The full text within the ad states:

"YOU COULD BE ALL THAT'S BETWEEN JAIME AND ANOTHER BEATING.

This is your chance to make a real difference to a vulnerable child's life by volunteering to sit on the Children's Panel. You don't need any qualifications to apply, you just need to care.

To find out more visit childrenspanelscotland.org"

(The Union, 2015)

The primary and stated purpose of the ad is to recruit volunteers for the Children's Panel. The intention of the speaker is thus to mobilise the audience into action that would start by applying to become a volunteer. Additionally, it could be argued that the ad also aims to raise awareness of domestic abuse and of the ways CHS is helping to address the issue. To better understand how this ad hopes to achieve its goal(s), the persuasive strategies in place will now be analysed, specifically through a process of identification of classical Aristotelian rhetorical appeals as well as any rhetorical devices the ad uses.

Firstly, it is noted that there is no appeal to *logos* in this ad and that the main persuasive appeal used is the appeal to emotion – *pathos*. In other words, emotion is what gives this message the power to move its readers into action. However, this ad is complex and appeals to multiple emotions simultaneously – these may, or may not, all be identified and equally interpreted by all members of the audience. Following Aristotle's (2007) definitions of emotions, by portraying the characters in the manner they are portrayed, the ad appeals to: (1) *pity*: 'a certain pain at an apparently destructive or painful event happening to one who does not deserve it' (139), i.e. the ad portrays the boy undeservedly suffering which aims to stimulate pity amongst the audience; (2) the audience's *kindliness* defined as a service to those in need for nothing in return and; (3) *fear* of some painful evil, in this case about to happen to the boy, as well as fear of those who attack the weaker (the father figure). While these emotions are felt towards the boy, there are also emotions felt towards the father figure: (4) *anger* against the father figure because he is about to cause unjustified pain to a child whom he should be protecting, and even (5) *hate* as one can hate the type of person that beats up children.

While Aristotle discusses these emotions in the sense of the evil being targeted at oneself or those near one, the ad manages to pass on these emotions to the readers even though they are not the boy or even know him personally. This can be explained by the theory of *catharsis* that suggests that audiences identify and empathise with the fictional characters represented. The ad further strengthens this cathartic effect by giving the boy a name, Jaime, thus creating a certain intimacy and bringing us closer to Jaime in order to empathise with his situation. Moreover, the representation of the good and innocent in the character of the boy

and the evil in the father figure helps the ad to mobilise the aforementioned emotions in the audience by tapping into our natural human concerns and protective inclinations for others who are in need, particularly if these others are vulnerable or not able to help themselves, such as children or animals.

In terms of persuasive devices, this ad relies on a trope of destabilisation through similarity, specifically *resonance*, a 'wordplay in the presence of a relevant pictorial' (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, 180). The headline, 'You could be all that's between Jaime and another beating,' is artfully placed on a division of the photo resembling a barrier or a wall between the two characters. Thus, the ad implies that the readers could be that wall protecting Jaime if they choose to take action. However, the ad places not only the audience but also the advertising organisation onto the wall that blocks the abuse from happening. As such, it is able to make the audience believe in the credibility of the organisation as well as their moral values stemming from their position of helping those in need.

In order to fully assess the *ethos* demonstrated in this ad, the speaker needs to be identified first. It is not the 'actors', i.e. Jaime or the father figure speaking to us, rather it is a first-person narrator that represents the organisation and speaks to 'you', the audience. First-person narrators have long served as vehicles for emotional messages as they are able to inspire audiences to feel the same way as the speaker (Stern, 1991). The use of first-person narrator also humanises the organisation by endowing it with an authentic voice (Stern, 1991). The organisation being the speaker here, it could be argued that *ethos* is implicitly present as all NFP organisations are implicitly and inherently good by working towards social betterment. While there is an absence of 'I' or 'we' or any explicit demonstration of who CHS are, or what they do, the ad indicates what work they do – running the Children's Panel and thus helping vulnerable children. The nature of the work thus demonstrates the organisation's good moral character, which is further strengthened visually by placing the CHS logo on the wall blocking the abuse from happening. The ad successfully demonstrates practical wisdom in the knowledge and experience the organisation has in providing help; it demonstrates virtue or the ability to do good by being portrayed as the leader in partaking in virtuous acts; and it demonstrates good will in wanting what is good for the sake of another, i.e. wanting to help vulnerable children.

In summary, the complex emotional appeal, coupled with it placing the reader as the saviour of a child suffering from domestic abuse, builds a powerful message to mobilise the audience into action. By appealing both to the kindliness and goodwill of the audience but also to their anger or hate towards the violator and pity towards, or fear for, the victim, the ad effectively manages to appeal to vari-

ous motivations the broader audience might have. The emotional appeal is complemented by a demonstration of a good moral character of the organisation giving the message credibility and reinforcing the importance of partaking in such virtuous acts as helping vulnerable children.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The analysed ad presents an example of how rhetorical analysis focused on classical Aristotelian rhetorical appeals and the use of rhetorical figures can help advertising scholars understand the persuasive power of complained-about offensive ads. This complements the existing studies focusing on attitudinal and potential behavioural responses as it sheds light on the manner in which offensive ads are creatively constructed using various persuasive strategies. Approaching the debate of rational and emotional appeals through its roots in Aristotelian classical rhetorical appeals allows for more nuanced exploration of how offence may be linked to rhetorical strategies chosen, and applied, by advertising creatives.

Whilst the analysis of the full archive is a current work in progress, our emerging findings along with the illustrative example of the 'Barrier' ad highlight the importance of appeals to *pathos* and *ethos* in NFP advertising that caused actual offence and triggered official complaints. The focus on the NFP sector reveals a strong presence of appeal grounded in *ethos* as most NFP organisations present themselves as ones working towards social betterment. This may often be implicit rather than explicit as not all organisations directly talk about themselves and instead focus on the problem, whether a social issue or a charitable cause, they are helping or supporting. The 'Barrier' ad further demonstrates a NFP-sector-characteristic appeal to *pathos*, relying on the combination of emotional imagery, in this case depicting a vulnerable victim in a situation of violence, and a verbal call to action towards the audience that could contribute to solving the issue. The appeal to multiple quite contrasting emotions within one ad, created by portraying two opposing characters, a victim and a violator, highlights the complexity of emotional appeals in advertising. While current research tends to discuss fear, threat, guilt, humour, sexual, and other appeals, our findings point to a much more complex situation that appears to take place in advertising design and production and that will affect different audiences in different ways.

In conclusion, the contributions of this study are threefold. Theoretically, it contributes to our current understanding of offensive advertising that goes beyond potential responses (Beard, 2008) and measures of effectiveness, and it provides insight into the persuasive strategies deployed in advertising that caused actual offence and triggered official complaints. Methodologically, by exploring strategies of persuasion, it introduces an innovative approach for the analysis of offen-

sive ads. Empirically, with the rich dataset available, this study expands on Theodorakis and colleagues' (2015) focus on visual controversy, and considers verbal, visual, and verbal-visual rhetorical strategies, as well as sources of controversy or offence beyond violence and eroticism.

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